



A Philosophical Investigation into African Philosophy as a Prototype of Greek Philosophy

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Abstract

Africa is often considered by the westerners as a continent of emotional and sentimental nature and as a result lacking in the criticality that would make the people philosophical. However, it must be remembered that civilisation has its cradle in Africa, precisely in Egypt. It must also be noted that most of the important figures in the world history as well as the biblical history in one way or the other travelled to Africa, for instance, the Ionian philosophers, Moses, Jesus Christ and a host of others. Hence, they were undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian thought. The blatant denial and the unbearable unwillingness of the western world to accept this crystalline fact is what spurred the researcher to carry out this study. The writer, therefore primarily employed the reflective and analytical methods to achieve the purpose of the study, that the Greek Philosophy has its origins in Africa.

Keywords: Greek Philosophy; African Background; Egyptian Sources; Ionian Philosophers; Eleatic School

General Introduction

For much of the history of philosophy, the origin of philosophical speculations has been credited to the traditional ancient Greek philosophers with Thales as the father and originator of Greek philosophy (who is dated to have flourished around the Sixth century B.C). Most records of the history of Greek philosophy are of course silent on the source or sources from which the early Greek philosophers got their education and the eventual formulation of their philosophical doctrines. Recent research has shown that in ancient Egypt there had been recorded forms of ethics, philosophy and religion which preceded Greek civilization. The identification of similarities of early Egyptian philosophical doctrines in Greek philosophical doctrines, have raised the contention of the Egyptian influence on the origin of Greek philosophy. Consequent upon this contention, African scholars have come to question the hitherto assumed origin of Greek philosophy.

What is more, the idea of the Greek world as the model of philosophical speculations and civilization, which denies and rejects the intellectual encounter between ancient Greeks and Egyptians prior to Western civilization, has been contended in recent times by Afrocentric scholars. A good example is I. C. Onyewuenyi's African Origin of Greek Philosophy; a piece of written literature that shows amongst other things, the reasons why it has often being denied that Africa has an intellectual history while discussing the Egyptian "origins of Greek Philosophy. To this end, this academic endeavor aims at furthering the study about the influence of the philosophical speculations of the intellectual class of ancient Egypt on Greek philosophy.

The Idea of Greek Philosophy

The birth of Greek, and by extension Western philosophy, has been conventionally situated in the sixth century and set in Ancient Greece. Dario Composta writing

about the history of ancient Western philosophy noted that “this philosophy was not born in Greece, but in the eastern colonies of Ionia; later it developed in the western colonies of Magna Graecia in southern Italy”. Dario C [1] the colonies of Ionian were culturally influenced by the Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Assyro-Babylonians. Dario C [2] the result of these contacts was extraordinary: the development of lyric and epic poetry, technological development and the birth of science (known as philosophy). Supporting this thesis, Dario noted that, “this explains why first generation philosophers up to Plato travelled to Egypt to enlarge their knowledge.” Dario C [3] also, the history of Western philosophy has been conventionally divided into four main periods: The Ancient period, the Middle Ages, the Modern period, and the Contemporary period. The Ancient period which can be said to be the foundation of Western philosophy, covers the philosophical thoughts of the pre-Socratics and the Socratics. Thus, we shall investigate into these periods of Western philosophy with the intention of delineating their African origin.

Egyptian philosophical sources of Greek Philosophy: The Pre-Socratics

The pre-Socratics are regarded as the first Greek philosophers, who were concerned with the study of nature and the origin of the universe (cosmos) by inquiring into what single material constitutes the substratum of the universe. This period includes: The Early Ionian philosophers, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatic school, and the Later Ionian philosophers. It is the purpose of this present section to undertake a study of some doctrines of the pre-Socratics. The aim is to show their African-Egyptian background and origin.

The Early Ionian Philosophers

The Early Ionian philosophers consist of Thales (624-546), Anaximander (610-530) and Anaximenes (596-548), who were a group of Greek philosophers active in Miletus, an Ionian colony in Asia Minor, during the sixth century B.C.E.

Thales: He is considered by authorities to be the first Western philosopher. Speaking about his early life, Dario stated that “He [Thales] certainly travelled to Egypt, as can be read in Diogenes Laertius and he visited the great centres of Lydia, a powerful kingdom then allied with Miletus and Ionia.” Dario C [4] his philosophy was concerned with the question on how the multiplicity of things may be resolved in a unity. According to Aristotle, Thales resolved this question by postulating that water was the fundamental material out of which all things were made [5].

Annaximander: He was a disciple of Thales. Like his teacher, he sought the primordial principle from which the

universe and its constituent parts were made. Compared to Thales, Anaximander takes a step forward away from any of the elements. Anaximander affirmed that the primordial principle of the universe and its constituent parts is “apeiron,” which must be something infinite, unlimited or Boundless [6].

Annaximenes: He was a disciple of Anaximander from whom he adopted the early Ionian search for the primordial principle from which the universe and its constituent parts were made. He attributes the characteristics of the Infinite, Boundless or the Unlimited primordial principle of Anaximander to Air. Anaximenes’ Air is credited with infinite quantity and endowed with life (a vital phenomenon). According to Anaximenes, the other elements, fire, wind, clouds, water and earth, are from this air through the process, he calls rarefaction and condensation.

African background/origin: The Egyptian philosophical sources of the early Ionian philosophers is found in doctrines of the Hermopolitan and Heliopolitan Egyptian philosophical schools respectively. The Hermopolitan school introduced Nun, the formless Chaos, qualified as primeval water; the Huk, qualified as the Boundless. Onyewuenyi I [7] the Heliopolitan school in articulating the elements of creation, mentioned Shu, qualified as the Air-god. Hence, Thales posited that water was the fundamental stuff underlying the universe as was influenced by the Egyptian water, Nun. Anaximander taught that the basic element was the boundless, which was an adoption of the Egyptian Huk (boundless). Anaximenes held that air was the basic stuff which the Egyptian identified as Shu-the Air god. As can be seen from above, the Ionian philosophers each chose one element as the underlying material on which creation depended from the doctrines of the Hermopolitan and Heliopolitan Egyptian philosophical schools.

The Pythagoreans

The Pythagoreans are members of a religious and philosophical society, which was founded by Pythagoras, a Samian, at Kroton in South Italy in the second half of the sixth century B.C. The Pythagoreans are known for their mathematico-metaphysical philosophy [8].

The cosmological doctrine: Tracing from the Milesian cosmologist Anaximander, from whom everything proceeds from the Unlimited or Indeterminate, Pythagoras combined to this notion that of the Limitedness. The Pythagoreans considered numbers as products of the limited and unlimited [9]. Transferring this notion to the world at large, the Pythagoreans spoke of the cosmological harmony of the universe [10]. The Pythagoreans declared that, things in the universe are numbers [11]. What did the Pythagoreans

mean by this position and how do they think of numbers? Copleston quoting Aristotle noted that, “the Pythagoreans held the elements of number as even and odd, and those of the former is unlimited and the latter limited” [11]. They transposed their mathematical conception, to the order of material things. The Pythagoreans therefore proceeded to give numbers to these material things.

African background/origin: The African connection of Pythagoreans’ cosmological doctrine can be traced first in the account of Pythagoras having studied under the Egyptian Mystery Priest-scholars. Speaking about Pythagoras’ education, Agbakoba stated that, “Pythagoras struggled to get into one of the Egyptian temple schools- he had to get a letter of introduction from the King of Samos to the Pharaoh of Egypt, soliciting the assistance of the Pharaoh to gain admission. After twenty years of study he returned home (European Mediterranean territories) to disseminate and practice what he has learnt. He set up a school, where pupils gathered and he taught them mathematics. This became known as the earliest developments of rationalism in Western thought” [12]. Another echo of Egyptian philosophy in the Pythagorean cosmological doctrine is found in the doctrine of Anaximenes. As can be seen above, the primary determinate element of the universe is not water, but Air. Indirectly, one could say that the philosophy of the Pythagoreans is derived from Egypt.

The Eleatic School

The treatment of the Eleatic school will centre on its two prominent members: Xenophanes and Parmenides, who practiced philosophy in the city of Elea in southern Italy.

Xenophanes: He was born at Colophon, in Asia Minor. He is regarded as the reputed founder of the Eleatic school, which held fast to the idea of the motionless One [13]. Copleston noted that “Xenophanes referring to the whole world, said the One was god” [14]. This points to the doctrine of monism, which holds that “there is exactly one substance, or exactly one kind of reality” [14].

Parmenides: He was a disciple of Xenophanes and followed in the philosophical doctrine of his predecessor. His philosophical teaching centered on the Doctrine of Being, Being as the original primary form of existence in the world. Like Xenophanes this Being is one. According to Parmenides, “Being [the One], is, and Becoming [change], is illusion” [15]. Parmenides established a system of Monistic Materialism. How then, can a monistic materialism of reality as Being, regard change and becoming as illusion? Quoting Professor Stace, Copleston noted that “Parmenides, Melissus and the Eleatics generally did regard Being as, in some sense, material, but he still tried to make out that Parmenides was

an idealist in that he held the cardinal thesis of idealism, that the absolute reality of which the world is a manifestation, consists in thought, in concept” [16]. In other words, Parmenides’ Being presents a metaphysical monism.

Egyptian background/origin: The Egyptian philosophical sources of the Eleatic doctrine of Being is found in the monotheistic thought of Pharaoh Akhenaton of the Eight Dynasty, who introduced into Egyptian thought the idea of the divine principle- Aten, as absolute ruler who exercises dominance over all nature, who created the world from the beginning and continually preserves it. He functions in four ways in the cosmos: as the principle animating all things; as the principle creating all things; as the principle sustaining all things; and as the principle determining the cycle of life.

The Later Ionian Philosophers

The treatment of the later Ionian philosophers consists of Heraclitus and Anaxagoras. They are called the “Later Ionian philosophers” as distinct from the early Ionian philosophers as a result of the demarcation of the period of their philosophical speculations.

Heraclitus

He was a native of Ephesus in Asia Minor. The actual date of Heraclitus’ birth and death is unknown, but we know that he reached the peak of his fame around 505-500 B. C., during the period of Ionian Anti-Persian activity. Heraclitus’ contribution to Greek philosophy is the conception of unity in diversity, difference in unity [17].

The doctrine of universal change: According to Heraclitus, “Reality is One; but it is many at the same time and that not merely accidental, but essentially” [17]. But then, what is the One-in-many? For Heraclitus, the essential nature of reality is Fire. Fire, Heraclitus says “is want and surfeit--it is, in other words, all things that are, but it is these things in a constant state of tension, of strife, of consuming, of kindling and of going out. In the process of fire Heraclitus distinguished two paths--the upward and the downward paths. He called change the upward and the downward paths and said that “the cosmos comes into being in virtue of this change” [18]. Going further to illustrate the upward and downward paths from which the cosmos come into being, Heraclitus is said to have stated that, “when fire is condensed it becomes moist, and under compression it turns to water, water being congealed is turned to earth, and this he calls the downward path. And, again, the earth is liquefied and from it water comes, and from that everything else; for he refers almost everything to the evaporation from the sea. This is the upward path” [19].

Going further, Heraclitus is noted to have spoken of the One as God. According to Heraclitus, “God is the Universal

Reason, the Universal Law immanent in all things, binding all things into a unity and determining the constant change in the universe." Hence, it may be concluded, that Heraclitus pursued a genuine philosophic notion, even though he pursued a material symbolism as the Ionian Cosmologists, his notion of the One is essentially many as clearly discerned beneath all the sensual symbolism of Fire.

African background/origin: Heraclitus regarded the One, Fire, like the cosmological conception of his Ionian predecessors as seen in Thales or Anaximenes who regarded Water or Air, as the primordial principle from which the universe and its constituent parts were made. The Egyptian philosophical sources of Heraclitus' choice of Fire as the essential nature of reality, according to Onyewuenyi, is derived from the Heliopolitan cosmological doctrine of Atum-Ra, the Fire-God as the basic element. According to this doctrine, Atum-Ra, the Fire-God, is the creative principle responsible for all change and for all being, the principle, of the unity of contraries which generates himself and thenceforth generate Shu (air), Tefnut (water), Geb (earth), Nut (sky), from which emerged Osiris/Issis and Seth/ Nephthys, responsible for all the material things of the universe " [19].

Anaxagoras: He was born at Clazomena, in Ionia. Anaxagoras is credited with the introduction of the principle of Nous (Mind), as the power and force responsible for forming of things out of the first mass into Greek philosophy. In this way Anaxagoras sought to maintain the Parmenidean doctrine of being, while adopting a realist attitude towards change, not dismissing it as an illusion of the senses but accepting it as a fact, and then trying to reconcile it with the Heraclitean theory of being. Anaxagoras disagreed with Empedocles that the ultimate units of all things are particles corresponding to the four elements-earth, air, Fire and water; but, taught about the principle responsible for the forming of things out of the First mass. According to Anaxagoras, "in the beginning, particles of all kinds were mingled together, infinite both in number and in smallness" [20]. He introduced the principle of Nous (Mind) as the power and force responsible for forming of things out of the first mass [21]. The Nous Anaxagoras said "has power over all things that have life, both greater and smaller, in that, it is present in all living things, men, animals and plants and is the same in all" [22]. This Nous according to Anaxagoras, "is infinite, self-ruled, and alone, but set the rotary movement or the vortex going itself, as it spreads, accounting for the subsequent motion" [23].

African background/origin: The Egyptian philosophical sources of Anaxagoras' doctrine of the Nous (Mind) is found in the Memphite explanation of the origin of things in Ptah who is clearly designated as the creator-god, who "accomplishes creation by Thought and Speech" [23]. These are expressed

in the creative functions under three categories of creation: Life, which he formed by transmitting his word to things; Vegetation, which means all growth on the earth; and Mind, in that he is the sovereign of all deities, who pronounces his divine mind to them to make them real" [24].

The Egyptian Philosophical Sources of Greek Philosophy: The Socratics

The Socratic period is regarded as the golden age of Greek philosophy. The Socratics consists of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Socrates

He was born in Athens. Although, he left no written evidence of his philosophy, it is from Plato and Xenophon that we know anything about Socrates in the Dialogues and Memorabilia, respectively. Socrates' philosophical interest was predominantly ethical. Copleston noted that "he [Socrates], turned away from the cosmological speculations of the Ionians towards man himself" [25].

Socrates' Ethical Doctrine: Socrates represents a reaction to the Sophistic movement that dominated Athens with its principle that holds that "man is the measure of all things" (a projection of a subjective and relativistic moral judgement). Against the prevalent principle of the Sophists, Socrates sought to develop an objective ethical principle. The cultivation of this ethical principle, according to Socrates, requires man's self-knowledge. Hence, his famous dictum: "Man know thyself" [26]. Socrates' position is sometimes called "intellectualism," because of the role he thinks the intellect plays in our moral life" [27]. This leads us to his doctrine of the human soul which inhabits the faculty of the intellect.

Socrates' doctrine of the human soul: For Socrates, the most important task in life is to care for one's soul. For him, "the soul was the true self and the body was now merely thought to be its accompaniment" [28]. An excellent soul is well-ordered, has wisdom, and maintain control over the emotions and bodily desires. Crito then asked him, Is the soul immortal? Thereon he explains that at death, the soul will swiftly escape from both the prison walls and the confines of the body to dwell in "the happiness of the blessed" [29].

African background/origin: The Egyptian philosophical sources of Socrates' ethical doctrine Man Know Thyself, has been discovered to have originated from the Egyptian Temples, on which the words "Man, know thyself" were written centuries before the birth of Socrates.³⁷ This inscription formed the basis of Socrates' ethical doctrine.

Another fact which supports the African prototype of Socrates' doctrine of the human soul is found in the Egyptian doctrine of the soul. The Egyptian doctrine of the soul is rooted in its conception of the human person. For the Egyptians, the human person is made up of two major parts, the Khat (Body) and the Ka (Soul, the divine spirit of the human person) [30]. In the Ka, the divine part of man, resides pure intelligence, the linkage between man and God [30]. This pure intelligence is however hampered by its being united with the body. According to the Egyptian Mystery System, "it is believed that the soul, being imprisoned in the body, found it difficult to achieve or attain pure intelligence [31]. Hence, one could rightly say that Socrates simply took over the Egyptian doctrine of soul, which is the separation of Khat (Body) from the Ka (Soul), which leads to the salvation of man, which Socrates called, "the happiness of the blessed."

Plato

Plato, a student of Socrates, was born in Athens. After Socrates' death he went to Megara with Euclid and began his first dialogues in memory and defence of his mentor, Socrates.

The theory of the state: Plato's political theory was influenced by his interest in building an ideal state. Plato's ideal state was a republic with three categories of citizens: the artisans, auxiliaries, and philosopher-kings, each of whom possessed distinct natures and capacities [32]. Plato admits that these class of guardians known as the philosopher-kings must be spirited and philosophic, should not have any kind of education, but only the education that leads to the knowledge of the true and good [33]. The guardians as those chosen out as candidates or possible rulers will be educated, not only in musical harmony and gymnastics, but also in mathematics and astronomy. The aim of which is with a view to enabling them to apprehend intelligible objects... that they may pass from becoming to truth and being, that they may be drawn towards truth and acquire the spirit of philosophy [33]. The arrival of truth and the acquisition of the spirit of philosophy by the guardian of the ideal state entails according to Plato, "the time at which they must raise the eye of soul to the universal light which lightens all things, and behold the absolute good; for that is the pattern according to which they are to order the state and lives of individuals [34]."

African background/origin: The Egyptian prototype in Plato's theory of the state is rooted in his adoption of the education of the Egyptian Mystery System as a recommendation for the education of the guardian of the ideal state also known as the philosopher-kings.

Plato in the education of the philosopher-kings adopted the Egyptian Mystery School System. In describing the

Egyptian Mystery System School, Onyewuenyi states that, "it was a kind of university where every kind of discipline such as philosophy, religion, medicine, law, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and science were taught by the priests. This group of disciplines was regarded as, The Wisdom of the Egyptians, [34] that enabled one to excel as a philosopher, medical doctor, astronomer or as mathematician. Onyewuenyi also noted that, "Plato in the Laws reports a dialogue between Clinias and Athenian in which Plato admits and regrets that the Greeks were ignorant of mathematics, which young Egyptians learned at an early age, thanks to the Egyptian school curriculum. He then advocated the educational program in Greece be modelled after that of the Egyptian" [35]. Hence, the guardian known as the philosopher-king, possesses the ultimate knowledge of the Good, which is likened to the spiritual consciousness of students in the Egyptian Mystery School System.

Aristotle

Aristotle, a pupil of Plato was born at Stagira in Macedonia. Although he was a student of Plato, he differed with Plato in certain doctrines. Aristotle began his philosophical speculation with what he called *prima philosophia*, otherwise known as metaphysics, and science of being as being [36].

Aristotle's metaphysics: Aristotle investigates into the cause of motion and change in the universe. For him, "Thales and the early Greek philosophers busied themselves with the material cause, trying to discover the ultimate substratum of things.... In this way arose, the philosophies of Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, who posited one material cause, or Empedocles, who postulated four elements" [37]. However, Aristotle sought for a cause other than the material cause. This is because for Aristotle, "as to the final cause, this was not explicitly, or at least satisfactorily treated by previous philosophers, but only by the way of accidentally." This led him to the ontological problem of the fundamental cause of the universe.

Furthermore, Aristotle postulates that every motion, every transit from potentiality to act, requires some principle in act; but if every becoming, every object in the movement, require an actual moving cause, then the world in general, the universe, requires a First Mover [38]. It should be noted that, Aristotle's notion of motion is eternal and as such, the first mover as the initiator of motion in the universe must necessarily be eternal. He declares "that there must be a First Mover which causes change without itself being changed, without having any potentiality, for if, for instance, it could cease from causing motion, then motion or change would not be necessarily eternal--which it is" [39]. The fundamental question becomes thus, how can this First Mover, being

immaterial, move and cause change to a material universe? To this fundamental question, Aristotle posited that, “the First Mover, being immaterial cannot perform any bodily action: His activity must be purely spiritual, and so intellectual. In other words, God’s activity is one of thought” [40]. Even though Aristotle didn’t further his explanation about the object of this thought, the Aristotelian God is efficient Cause only by being the final Cause and he defined God as “Thought of Thought” [41]. In this sense, the First Mover, moves the universe and all objects in thought.

African background/origin: The Egyptian prototype in Aristotle’s metaphysical doctrine is found in the Memphite philosophical doctrine of Ptah. In the Memphite explanation of the origin of things, Ptah, in “the Memphite text turns as far as the Egyptian could go towards a creation in philosophical terms: the thought which came into the heart of a god and the commanding utterance which brought that thought into reality” [42]. Hence, one could rightly say that Aristotle borrowing from the idea of the activity of the Mind as postulated by Anaxagoras, took it over to his idea of the First Mover. Even though Copleston noted that, Anaxagoras was accused by Aristotle of using Mind simply as a cloak for ignorance [43], Aristotle arriving at the fundamental cause of motion and change in the universe, resulted to God’s activity as thought. In other words, Anaxagoras’ activity of the Mind is taken as Thought in Aristotle.

Conclusion

The Greek philosophy actually originated at the sea-board of Asia Minor. Admittedly, the early Greek philosophers were Ionians. The conception thus became that it is undeniable that Greek philosophy arose among people whose civilization went back to the pre-historic times of Greece, making the closing period of Ionian greatness on the one hand and ushering in on the other hand the splendour of Hellenicity, particularly of Athenian culture [43]. It has to be noted that Ionia was the meeting-place of West and East. Hence, one may rightly ask at this point whether the Greek philosophy was not due to Oriental influences. Moreso, it may be asked if the Greek Philosophy was not borrowed from Babylon or Egypt.

To this Copleston stated that, “this view has been maintained, but had to be abandoned” [44]. Inferring thus from Copleston’s assertion, if the view of the Egyptian influence on Greek philosophical thought has been maintained, but had to be abandoned, then, what accounts for its abandonment? Quoting Burnet, Copleston asserts that, “this is because, it would not be easy to explicate how Egyptian thought systems were transmitted to the Greeks [45]. The Greeks, then, stands as the original thinkers of their philosophical speculations. These splendid achievements of

Greek thought were cradled in Ionia, and if Ionia was the cradle of Greek philosophy, Miletus was the cradle of Ionian philosophy. For it was at Miletus that Thales, the reportedly early Ionian philosopher flourished [46]. Still quoting Burnet, Copleston further asserts that, “For it is practically a waste of time to inquire whether the philosophical ideas of this or that Eastern people could be communicated to the Greeks or not, unlike we have first ascertained that the people in question really possessed a philosophy” [47]. Hence, the fundamental question, Do the Egyptians possess a philosophy?

To this Joseph Omoregbe argues that “the transmission and preservation of philosophical reflections in writing, is in the form of book...the Western world has been fortunate in this regard in the transmission and preservation of their philosophical reflections [48]. On this basis, therefore, the assumption that the Greeks around the fifth century BC were the first to engage in the philosophical epochs of humanity is wholly a prejudicial one [48]. Furthermore, the presentation of philosophical reflections in Africa began in Ancient Egypt, and the early Egyptian scholars were priest-philosophers who staffed the Egyptian Mystery System Schools, which were attached to the various cities of the kingdom at Memphis, Heliopolis, Khmunu, Thebes and in other Egyptian colonies. Describing the Egyptian Mystery System Schools, Onyewuenyi states that, “it was a kind of university where every kind of discipline such as philosophy, religion, medicine, law, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and science were taught by the priests. This group of disciplines was regarded to as, The Wisdom of the Egyptians” [49].

In the Hermopolitan school, Nun, the formless chaos, qualified as primeval water is employed as the symbol of the divine in the creation of the universe. The Heliopolitan school articulated the Atum-Ra, the Sun-God or Fire-God and the Ennead. The Memphite school accentuated Ptah, the creator-god and the First Mover, who accomplishes creation by his divine mind. These three Egyptian philosophical schools and their doctrines, were developed long before Greece as a nation was formed and before Thales or any other early Greek philosophers was born [50].

The greatest single effect of the teachings of ancient Egyptian philosophical schools analysed above is that, it formed the basis of philosophical thoughts that were later developed as Greek philosophy. However, one may notice that we cannot really appreciate the Egyptian philosophical doctrines contained within Greek philosophy except we apply to the latter its interpretation principles. And as Agbakoba noted, “apparently, the Greeks on getting home tried to see what sense they could make of the ‘incomplete knowledge’ they had gained, how they could justify some of the aphorisms and cryptic claims they had picked up” [51]. Thus, we find the Greeks hanging on Egyptian philosophical

thoughts, from which they developed what is now known as Greek Philosophy.

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